

5/2012

NOTAT

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EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF DEMOCRATISATION

Influence from Scotland on School Reforms in
Nineteenth Century Norway

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Publisher	Volda University College
ISSN	1891-5973
Print set	Author
Distribution	http://www.hivolda.no/notat

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Introduction

The connection between Norway and Scotland is old. If we take a look at the 17th and the 18th century, the trade between the two countries flourished. Scottish merchants were deeply involved in the export of dried codfish to Spain and Portugal from Norway, and Scotland's need for timber contributed to the deforestation of West Norway.¹ During the 18th century the contact became more and more important as mercantilism stimulated export. This connection was, of course, not limited to trade. Cultural and political exchange of ideas followed as these two nations had much in common. Culturally, Norwegian pietism and Scottish puritanism could be seen as Siamese twins, not only because of their strictness in morals, but also in their growing interest for education. Politically, Norwegians got knowledge of a country with a peripheral position, far away from the centre of power, but also with a long history of struggle for their own identity as people, combined with an awareness of being a leading nation in the academic Western world. That may have stimulated Norwegians to look to Scotland in the period of nation building. In the time after 1814 Norway started the process towards independency, until 1905 in union with Sweden, looking for other cultural impulses than those which came from the other neighbours that had more or less exercised colonial power over us.

This process of building a nation needed inspiration in many areas of politics. German and Danish national romanticism suited the ruling class, but not so much those who fought for a democratization of the Norwegian society. Towards the end of the 19th century, the liberal political movement in Norway won decisive victories as the parliamentary system was introduced in 1884, and as the right to vote was granted to all men in 1898 and women in 1913. But democracy was more than that. The quality of a democratic society should be measured in areas like social security and in willingness to give education for all. In the 1850s a commission prepared new laws concerning poverty, and one of the first things the commission did was to translate a book of Thomas Chalmers about the issue. I mention this to show some of the variety of influence from the other side of the North Sea, but my topic is the other quality I mentioned concerning a prosperous society: The responsibility of a state, and the church, to provide a basic education for the children, and to give common people the right to participate in *the decision making processes regarding the education*.

The contribution of the liberal movement in building the Norwegian nation included a constant fight against the hierarchical style of the Danish autocracy, aiming at shaping a civil

¹ Arne Odd Johnsen, «Den britiske innflyttingen til Nordmør på 1700-tallet», in *Heimen*, volume V, 1941.

society where the people could gain power to build a better future through their free associations that grew in multitude at that time. The Norwegian liberalism of the 19th century, that in many respects was a result of influence from Scotland, was mostly not anarchistic. A free society should be secured by laws that guaranteed the basic human rights in order to let every man act as a political individual for the best of the society. Just like the social democrats in the 1900s, the liberalists of the 1800s used laws as a tool for changing.

According to Stein Rokkan,² Norwegian history of the 19th century can only be properly understood as a period of *cultural conflicts*. First of all, the union with Denmark ended when it became clear not only for common man, but also for the officials of the crown that there was a cultural gap between the two nations. Although educated in Copenhagen and appointed by the king, the ruling class became convinced about the need for Norway to be independent. In the following decades, the inner conflicts came to surface. One conflict was between the towns and the rural areas. Another problem was between periphery and centralized power. A third area of conflict had to do with language. The officials spoke and wrote Danish, a language far away from the dialects spoken by the population. According to the most famous writer of West Norway at the end of the century, Arne Garborg, the clergy alienated themselves from common people by speaking like Danish colonists.

There are religious aspects related to most of these conflict areas. The differences between the conventional, national religion and the new voluntary or individualistic understanding of Christian faith in the lay movements grew in size and temperature. The conflicts were institutionalised as the free churches grew in the towns. The origin of the religious conflict may be studied in the writings of Hans Nielsen Hauge (1771-1824), the most famous lay preacher in Norway. His followers built their prayer houses at the countryside as a supplement to the work of the vicars in the state church. The reasons why they stayed within the state church may have been many, but one of them has to do with my topic: their concern for confessional Lutheran instruction through the public schools, as a part of their overall interest in education. In the following, I will focus on the educational system as one key to understanding the cultural conflict, but also in order to reveal the depth of the cultural contact with Scotland.

What was the vision of those people who worked for reforms of the society? First of all, their political ideas were liberal, inspired from many parts of the modern world, and they aimed at a society of equality and freedom. Their vision of state and people may be expressed

² Peter Flora (ed.), *State formation, Nation-building and Mass Politics in Europe: The theory of Stein Rokkan base don his collected works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

in what Enlightenment philosophers in Scotland called a *civil society*.³ If you think of the society as a pyramid with the king at the top and the people at the bottom, you will have a room in between, and that room you can divide into different sectors, one for the school, one for religion, one for law and so on. According to the autocratic ideology, to a large extent legitimated by the Lutheran theocratic theology of that time, these sectors should be ruled by the Christian king. The liberals wanted a room of freedom (including freedom of faith), that is to establish influence “from below”, by the people, on these areas.

Looking at the cultural conflicts in the nineteenth-century Norway, one cannot avoid seeing that the struggle for power was the essence. One should therefore not expect the introduction of foreign ideas as something that led to a more peaceful mentality and development. On the contrary, the importance of new ideas should be seen in their ability to intensify the conflict. That is especially to be expected when liberal ideas were exchanged between two religious cultures, based on differences in confessions that were important for theologians. The clergy of Norway was extremely antagonistic in their attitude towards Scottish Calvinism, while the dogmatic differences might not have been visible for lay people.

The school system in Norway until 1860

The origin of the school system in Norway is to be found in Pietism, although already the reformation saw the need for basic knowledge of the Christian faith among ordinary people. The reformation brought not only the idea that a certain knowledge was important for everybody, but gave us also a pattern, showing what was most important to learn. We got Luther’s Small Catechism. Luther’s intention was that this little book should be used by the father, teaching his children what they needed to lead a life as Christians, but King Christian V understood that the fathers also needed instruction, so, he made it an obligation for the clergy to use the last part of their sermons to teach the catechism. And the parish clerks shared this duty with the vicars. They gathered the children in the different districts of the parishes in private houses, building up a system of “omgangsskole”, a word that can be translated as itinerating schools, where the teacher travelled through the parish, teaching the children in private homes. The Small Catechism was used as a tool both for learning the ABC and for learning the basic Christian faith.

This was of course not enough. The pietists were concerned with learning and this concern claimed more systematic teaching. First, the pietistic king Christian VI introduced a law in

³ Alexander Broadie, *The Schottish Enlightenment. The Historical Age of the Historical Nation*. Edinburgh: Birlinn 2001,86

1736 that said that all children should be confirmed in the church. To make this law effective, the king decided that you could not be married before you were confirmed. But in order to learn what was required to be confirmed, one had to be able to read, and three years later the first law about “folkeskolen” came, a primary school for all.

The school system we got in 1739 was a church school. One main purpose was to prepare the children for confirmation. The Small Catechism was still the only text book, expanded by explanations by the Danish bishop Erik Pontoppidan in a book, called *Truth into godliness*. The parish clerk was the teacher, and he was under supervision of the vicars. During the first decades of the 1800s, the itinerating school was improved as we got school buildings and seminars for training teachers, but the schools remained under control of the clergy until 1860. At that time we got a new law introducing a new leadership, the so-called school directors, one for each diocese.

It is easy for us, looking back, to see that the Norwegian children got a poor education at that time. It was easy to see it for contemporary observers also, but it might have been a little better than a Scottish church man thought. His name was Robert Buchanan and he travelled along the coast, up to the North Cape. When the boat stopped in a village around the Polar circle, he went ashore and distributed small Christian tracts to the population, and afterwards he wrote with astonishment in his diary: “They could all read and write, even the women”.

Talking about the origin of education for all, we are touching an ongoing debate between theories of civilization. Some social historians, following Foucault, tend to see education in the early modern society as something the ruling classes used to discipline the masses, while others, like Norbert Elias, think of civilisation as a process initiated by different groups, struggling for power and positions.⁴ This essay is not written on an either-or basis. It goes without saying that there is some truth in both theories. On one hand, we see an autocratic regime of a confessional kingdom like Denmark-Norway, governed by protectionist principles in trade as well in religion, striving for an orthodoxy that could best be achieved through basic teaching. On the other hand, we see movements from the lowest strata of the population, awakened by a preaching that made them as individuals responsible for the fate and future of themselves and their children. If you look for the roots of this new mentality, a typical theological (correct and irrelevant) answer that this is Methodist theology, swallow Arminian free will preaching. I don't think this shift of mentality had much to do with theology. We are looking at the legacy of Scottish enlightenment, the new self-consciousness that became the

⁴ R.D. Anderson, *Scottish Education since the Reformation*. Edinburgh: The economic and Social History Society of Scotland, 1997, 11.

basic idea of modernity.⁵ It is easier to see the changes that it brought, because when the lay people had listened to this message, they broke up from the pietistic understanding of the divinely ordered society and took control over a strategy that had been the king's. Around the midst of the 19th century we can also see a new group of lay leaders, well equipped for challenging the spiritual monopoly of the clergy. The first generation of teachers, educated at the new seminars, found jobs in all parts of the country and worked for an improved education and for a more democratic society.

What did they look for in Scotland?

One person contributed more than anyone else to the new law of 1860, a law that started a process that changed the school from being a church school to a school by and for the people. His name was Hartvig Nissen and he started his work by going to Scotland in 1853. At his return to Norway, he wrote a report of about 500 pages. Later on, many others followed in his footsteps, both by studying in Scotland and by implementing some of his ideas in their work as school leaders. I will present some of them, but let us first reflect upon some questions like: Why did they go abroad, and what did they find?

The obvious answer to the first question is that they looked for inspiration in their efforts to improve the school system as a part of the nation building project that started as Norway got its independence. They may have done it because they needed help to find the direction they needed to go. More precisely, I think they knew what they wanted to do, but they needed the weight of the arguments they could find in another country with a stronger tradition for learning. If this was the case, they went to Scotland, found what they looked for and selected those examples that suited their own plans. What I am trying to say is that we should not take it for granted that Nissen in his voluminous report drew an exact picture of the situation in Scottish schools at that time. On the contrary, we should be aware of his interests and suspect him for telling what could be in favour of these interests. In any case, his report convinced Norwegian authorities that reforms were possible and necessary. Not only did he influence the law making process, but even more the implementing period afterwards through the first generation of School inspectors.

Let me give you an example of how Nissen reports in a way that might be a comment on the situation in Norway. He writes about teaching in districts where Gaelic is the vernacular language. He admits that it must be a goal to teach the children to read and write English, but

⁵ Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment. The Scot's Invention of the Modern World*. London: Harper perennial 2001.

to start by teaching the children English before they could read their own language was harassment, he says, and the result was often that they did not learn to read either Gaelic or English. I do not think Nissen wrote this only to tell about Gaelic schools. He brought home an argument in support of those who worked for making the language in Norway less Danish and more adjusted to the spoken language at that time. He had to be cautious. His own patron, the great historian P.A. Munch, who had even sent with him a letter of recommendation to friends at the University of Edinburgh, was leading the campaign against every linguistic reform, revealing the tastelessness of the Norwegian people.⁶

Hartvig Nissen and his followers

When we start looking at Hartvig Nissen and his career, we will soon see that he knew what he was looking for. He had in fact known what he wanted since he as a young student in Copenhagen met the ideas of the Danish writer Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, a man who influenced both Denmark and Norway in his life-long campaign against the old Latin school system. Grundtvig and his friends built up a lot of schools for young people, schools that should aim at “preparing for life”, setting a standard of education that could enable sons and daughters of peasants to take care of the future of a nation.

Talking about the Latin schools, it is fascinating to see how Nissen indirectly argued against the system in his report. He writes at length about Latin in the schools of Scotland. He does not say it is wrong, but he questions the usefulness. He admits that it is good for English children to learn about the Latin origin of so much in their language, but, he says, most of the Latin words in English are not used by the Scottish people. They don't use words like “moral” or “immoral”, they just say that something is right or wrong. They don't speak of immortality but of living forever, and so on. Latin is good, but only if it helps the students to a better understanding of their own language.

As early as in 1843 Nissen initiated a reform school in Christiania and some years later he even started a school for young girls, convinced that women should reach the same standard of education as men.

It goes without saying that he was met with resistance, but gained also respect for his competence. In 1851 he was appointed advisor for the government, and, as mentioned above, he was sent to Scotland in order to study the school system there. His plan was to go also to the US, but he found out after having spent months in Scotland that he had learnt enough, and went home. He seems to have stayed in Scotland from April till October, and stayed two

⁶ Trygve Knudsen and Per Sveaas Andersen (ed.) *Lærde brev fra og til P.A. Munch* 1971,379.

weeks in Edinburgh trying to get used to the language. He mentioned that the universities were closed all that time, so he concentrated most of his work visiting elementary schools, listening to the teaching and discussing with the teachers.

As mentioned above, his report laid a foundation for the new School law of 1860, but it became even more important for the school directors who were appointed as a result of the new law. A network was established, of which I can only give you a short survey.

One of his followers, Ole Irgens, became the first school director in Bergen, and we can compare his reforms in Bergen with the ideas Nissen brought home. He started his career by building a school for girls in Bergen, together with his friend Ole Holck, who later became school director in Hamar in East Norway. They were both at a time members of the Parliament. A third member of the group, Jakob Sverdrup, started as a teacher at Nissen's school in Christiania, but rather soon he became vicar in West Norway, and advanced in politics to be a member of the government, with responsibility of education. Let me also mention Ole Vollan, who became editor of a newspaper in Bergen, agitating for different sorts of democratic reforms in the society. Like Nissen, they were all theologians, but most of them never entered the clergy. They were deeply involved in the struggle for church reforms. In modern words one could say that church reforms were their "favourite waste of time" (as most of their proposals were vetoed by the majority), and the Scottish slogan "a free church in a free state" was their goal.

Let me also mention two others. One young teacher from a little place in South Norway, named Asbjørn Knudsen, attended a voluntary synod for Church of Norway in 1873. There he met a visitor from Scotland who made a strong impression on him. His name was Alexander Duff, the great missionary, honorary doctor of many universities and at that time moderator of the Free Church of Scotland. What he told him caused Knudsen to go to Scotland to study education. After his return, Knudsen started the implementation of an idea he got during his journey. He started a college, for training teachers for the primary schools. Some years later a similar college was founded also in Volda, and the founder, Henrik Kaarstad, studied pedagogics in Scotland in 1909. At that time, however, an ongoing debate about the state church reached a climax in Norway. Kaarstad was an untiring spokesman for a free folk church, and his report became more about the Free Church of Scotland, than about the school.

What did Nissen report?

As mentioned, his report was voluminous, about 500 pages.⁷ The first hundred pages are about different types of schools, from parochial schools to industrial schools. Then he goes on to write about education of teachers. The last part is about proposals for measures to be taken for a further development of the Norwegian school system.

He reports of a system where Churches and Schools are closely linked together. The schools are established by the state, but ruled by the church, mainly through the Kirk session, or they are private schools. When he describes the contribution of churches in the area of education, Nissen honours both the established church and the Free church, the church body that was the result of the Disruption in 1843.⁸ He makes it clear that he doubted whether the disruption was necessary, but pays respect to the sacrifices of the members of the Free church for the sake of education for all, both in rural areas and in the towns. One can at the same time see that he is aware of the problem when he explains his use of the word state church, the word that he uses as an equivalent to the English formula “The church established by law”. Then he translated the expression word by word, something that came out in a very provocative, or even blasphemous way for his readers, because he translated “established” by “instituted”. After all, who could accept that the church of Norway was instituted by the Constitution of 1814. Hadn’t we had a church before that?

He describes the Established church and the Free church as having the same confession. The only difference that caused the catastrophe of 1843 was about the patronage, the right of a lay person to appoint pastors. For one third of the parishes that lay person was the king, or at the time of the Disruption, the queen.

In one or two sentences Nissen threw a little bomb into his own surroundings. He said that the basic of the church system in Norway, the right of the King to appoint vicars and bishops, had caused so many people to leave the established church of Scotland and to form a new church body with a size and a strength that made it equal to the church they left. The Free church, he says, never build a church without also building a school.

The way Nissen describes how schools were governed in Scotland, seems at the first look to be little different from the Norwegian system at that time. The pastor of the local parish had much power, both in appointment of teachers, and in supervising them. That is how it was in

⁷ Hartvig Nissen, *Beskrivelse over Skotlands Almueskolevæsen tilligemed Forslag til forskjellige Foranstaltninger til en videre Udvikling af det norske Almueskolevæsen*. Christiania: P.T. Mallings Forlags-Boghandel, 1854.

⁸ Birger Løvlie, *Vestavind. 1870-årenes debatt om kristenliv og kirkeordning under innflytelse fra Skottland*. Trondheim: Tapir 2002,86.

Norway, too. The difference lies in the pastorate. A pastor was in Norway an official of the Crown and led his congregation without a kirk session. Until 1842 a lay person could not preach in Norway without permission of the vicar, and when that law was abolished, many pastors tried to forbid lay preaching as something that violated the Lutheran confession. The point is that there were no links between the vicars and their parish members. The vicar was the King's man, and the king lived in Sweden, not having education of Norwegian children as his first priority.

At this time, the gap between the clergy and lay people came to the surface, as a conflict that became more and more intolerable. Church historians tend to see this as primarily a conflict of theology, but that is to miss the point. It was a conflict about power concerning an area that was of highest interest for the church, the people and their elected politicians. Common people wanted the best education for gifted children, and they fought for influence in the school system as a part of their fight for democracy, while much of the clergy had no other vision for the school than that it should be a preparation for confirmation. In this conflict the clergy had to lose. The School law of 1860 introduced the school director as the head of the schools in every municipality, together with a board of schools. After 1889 the state church vicar was not automatically the head of the school commission. Thus, the schools went from a position under the church, to be a parallel structure beside the church, a school for and by the citizens. The objective was not a secular school, "our goal is a Christian school", wrote one of the early school directors in West-Norway. One conservative editor of a Church newsletter in Christiania protested. The doors to the schools have been opened to atheism, he wrote, and by atheism he meant the ideas of men like John Stuart Mill. Jakob Sverdrup answered in a sarcastic tone in his own low church and liberal newsletter: Who believes that the quality of education is dependent on the authority of the clergy?

What did Scottish children learn at school?

What impressed Nissen mostly seems to be the emphasis on subjects like history and geography. He observed that the children learnt British and global history not only in lessons called history, but also when the subject was English language. He observed that they did not only learn the names of countries and capitals, but also climate zones and time zones. He heard how the children could tell what time it was in Madrid when it was two o'clock in Edinburgh. And he could report that in religious instruction the Bible history, or stories, came before the catechism. He might have been surprised or even disappointed to see that arithmetic was not a core subject (compulsory), just like in Norway, but when he adds that the

parents had the right to decide that their children should learn that subject, he showed the difference from Norway.

The report of Nissen is full of details, and deserves to be thoroughly studied, both by Norwegian and Scottish historians. My limited time does not allow me to go in depth. From my point of view, it is most interesting to see that two years later, Ole Irgens published a booklet with proposals for improvements in the primary schools in Bergen. Almost every proposal can be traced back to Nissen, and sometimes with the striking argument: This has already been done in other countries.⁹

Education of teachers

Nissen states that there is no other land where the teachers in the elementary schools have a higher standard of education than in Scotland. The majority had for a period studied at a university and the length of their studies equalled the education of the Norwegian clergy. No wonder he found it a waste of time to go to America to study more! When he compares Scotland with other countries in Europe, he finds some disadvantages in the Scottish tradition; it might be too theoretical, and too little didactical, especially compared to Germany. But after some weeks he comes to Glasgow and observes that the pedagogic movement has also come to Scotland. There he found a teacher training college built up by the Free Church, led by a Mr Stow. This Seminary had two departments. One that Nissen called the Normal School and one he called the Model School. In this model school young student went through a program, starting as observers and ended up teaching under supervision by an experienced teacher.

This practice was not new or unknown to those who should read his report. Model schools had been the most significant part in training teachers in Norway since the first Teacher training institutions started about 1830.¹⁰ My guess is that Nissen writes so much about this in order to emphasize the balance between academic knowledge and the ability to teach.

Education and democracy

What I have described now is more than reforms of the school system; it was an ongoing quest for reforms in education as a tool for democratization. It was not an attempt to reduce Christianity in the schools; it was a fight led by convinced Christians against the conservative clergy, who held their positions because of the Patronage. The gap became almost unbridgeable when all the bishops and a majority of the clergy advised the lay people to vote

⁹ Ole Irgens, *Forslag til en ny Plan for bergens Almueskolevæsen*. Bergen: Beyers Bogtrykkeri, 1862.

¹⁰ Andreas Feragen, *Tilbagesyn paa mit liv med et blick paa folkeskolen før og nu*. Hamar: Norsk skoletidendes bogtrykkeri 1904,39.

conservative at the general election in 1883. And it is possible to see (“it’s easy if you try”) that a clergy that did not accept democracy lost its credibility as political authority in school matters.

I can imagine that some of you are wondering to what extent your country in the 19th century could be an inspiration for other people in building a modern democracy. The answer to that question is not to be found primarily in the quality of the Scottish society at that time, but in how these qualities were used to throw light on the bad sides of another society. The ideas that Nissen, and after him other school politicians, brought home from Scotland revealed the deficiencies of the Norwegian system and gave credibility to reforms that some leaders worked for. This credibility was decisive, not at least because the fight for reforms had to be fought on a Christian basis to a large extent against the clergy of a national church.

You may not be the only ones who raise the question. Norwegian researchers in history tend to neglect the religious aspect of the democratisation. My point is that one aspect of the process was a fight between two different understandings of a Christian society. The conservatives pointed to the constitution, saying that Norway is an evangelical Lutheran country under a Lutheran king. The political liberal lay people did not believe in a Christian nation, and they had no respect for the church as a hierarchy. Their idea of the church was that the church should gain influence “from below”, through its members, functioning as the leaven in the dough (Matt 13,33). And they had confidence enough in the Christian character of the people to take the main instrument of the church, the school, out of the hands of the clergy. Surprisingly or not, this is the influence of Scottish Presbyterianism on the society of Norway in the 19th century. Not so that it stimulated a harmonious development; The Scottish influence should be understood as an element *that led to an escalation of a cultural conflict* wherein those values prevailed that little by little transformed the Norwegian society.

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